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SPECIAL ESTIMATE

PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO CERTAIN POSSIBLE US COURSES OF ACTION IN INDOCHINA THROUGH 1954



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21 December 1953

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Paul A. Borel
PAUL A. BOREL
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PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO CERTAIN POSSIBLE US COURSES OF ACTION IN INDOCHINA THROUGH 1954

THE PROBLEM¹

To estimate the probable reactions of Communist China and the USSR to:

- a. The commitment in Indochina, before the end of 1954, of US ground, air, and naval forces on a scale sufficient to defeat decisively the field forces of the Viet Minh.
- b. The commitment in Indochina, before the end of 1954, of US ground, air, and naval forces on a scale sufficient to hold the Viet Minh in check until such time as US-developed Vietnamese forces could decisively defeat the field forces of the Viet Minh.

ASSUMPTIONS¹

For both a. and b. above:

1. No Chinese Communist intervention in force in Indochina had taken place.
2. Commitment of US forces had been publicly requested by the French and Vietnamese governments.
3. At the time of the US commitment French Union forces still retained essentially their present position in the Tonkin Delta.
4. Communist China and the USSR would have prior knowledge of the US intent to commit its forces in Indochina.
5. Following the US commitment, there would be a phased withdrawal of French forces from Indochina. ✓
6. The US will warn the Chinese Communists that if they openly intervene² in the fighting in Indochina, the US will not limit its military action to Indochina.

ESTIMATE

1. We believe that the Communists would assume that the purpose of committing US forces in Indochina was the decisive defeat of the Viet Minh. Consequently, we believe that Communist reactions to such a US commitment would be substantially the same whether

it were designed to defeat the Viet Minh with US forces (Problem a.) or eventually with US-trained Vietnam forces (Problem b.).

In the Event of a Pending US Commitment

2. We do not believe that Communist China, upon learning of a forthcoming commitment by the US, would immediately intervene openly with substantial forces in Indochina. The acceptance by Communist China of an armistice in Korea, its policies to date with respect to Indochina, and its present emphasis on

¹The Problem and the Assumptions have been provided to the Intelligence community as a basis for the estimate.

²For the purposes of this estimate, open intervention is defined as the commitment of substantial Chinese Communist combat forces, under any guise.

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domestic problems seem to indicate a desire at this time to avoid open intervention in the Indochina war or expansion of the conflict to Communist China. US warnings against Chinese Communist intervention in force³ probably would have a strong deterrent effect. Moreover, the political advantage to be gained by portraying the US as an "aggressor" would probably appear both to Communist China and the USSR to outweigh the military advantage of moving large Chinese Communist forces into Indochina before the arrival of US forces.

3. In addition, Communist leadership would probably estimate that they would have time to take a number of steps which, without a serious risk of expanding the war to China, might deter a US military commitment or seriously impair its effectiveness. Such steps might include:

a. Increasing logistic and rear area support to the Viet Minh.

b. Covertly committing Chinese troops to operate as "Viet Minh guerrillas."

c. Encouraging intensified Viet Minh guerrilla and sabotage operations in Indochina, particularly in and around the Tonkin Delta, designed to inflict such damage on the French Union position as to increase the difficulties of the US operation.

d. Building up Chinese Communist strength in south China, including Hainan.

e. Seeking by diplomatic and propaganda means in the UN and elsewhere to forestall US action, to gain the support of non-Communist countries, and to exploit differences between the US and its allies over preparations for this operation.

³Such warnings would reinforce the warning already given by Secretary of State Dulles, in his American Legion Speech at St. Louis, 2 September 1953:

"Communist China has been and now is training, equipping and supplying the Communist forces in Indochina. There is the risk that, as in Korea, Red China might send its own army into Indochina. The Chinese Communist regime should realize that such a second aggression could not occur without grave consequences which might not be confined in Indochina. I say this soberly in the interest of peace and in the hope of preventing another aggressor miscalculation."

f. Concluding a defense pact with the Viet Minh.

Although, in response to a US military commitment in Indochina, the Communists might threaten to renew hostilities in Korea, we believe that they would not actually take such action as they probably estimate that renewed aggression in Korea would result in expanding the conflict to Communist China itself.

Actual US Commitment

4. In the initial stages of an actual US military commitment, the Communists might not feel compelled to intervene openly in force immediately. They would recognize the difficulties which the US forces would face in operating in the Indochina climate and terrain. They would also realize that the xenophobia of the indigenous population of Indochina might be effectively exploited to the disadvantage of US forces by Communist propaganda; the Chinese Communists would therefore prefer that the US rather than themselves be confronted with this antiforeign attitude. They might estimate that, with increased aid from Communist China, the Viet Minh forces, by employing harassing and infiltrating tactics and avoiding major engagements, could make any US advance at the least slow and difficult. It is probable, therefore, that the Chinese Communists would initially follow a cautious military policy while they assessed the scale, nature, and probable success of the US action, the effect of such action on Vietnamese national morale and military capabilities, the subsequent military and political moves of the French, the temper of US opinion, the reactions of US allies and the neutralist states, and the position of the UN. Even at this early stage, however, the Chinese Communists would probably take strong actions short of open intervention in an effort to prevent the US from destroying the Viet Minh armed forces.⁴

⁴The Special Assistant, Intelligence, Department of State, believes that the timing of the Communist reaction to the commitment of US forces in Indochina cannot be estimated with any degree of assurance. He therefore believes that a decision by the Communists to follow a cautious policy in the initial stages of the US action should be presented as a possibility, rather than as a probability.

i. In addition to the steps outlined in paragraph 3 above, the Chinese Communists, at this early stage of US commitment, would probably provide an increased number of military advisors, possibly including commanders for major Viet Minh units. Moreover, Peiping might covertly furnish limited air support for Viet Minh ground forces, but would be unlikely to undertake air operations which it estimated would provoke US retaliation against Communist China itself other than retaliation against those airfields from which such air attacks were launched.

3. If the leaders of Communist China and the USSR came to believe that a protracted stalemate in Indochina was likely, they would probably not openly commit Chinese Communist ground, naval, or air forces to an intervention in force in Indochina, nor would they renew hostilities in Korea or commit new acts of armed aggression elsewhere in the Far East. Peiping and Moscow would probably believe that a long and indecisive war in Indochina could be exploited politically and that, in time, US and Vietnamese will to fight might be worn down.

7. If at any time, however, the leaders of Communist China and the USSR came to believe that a decisive defeat of the Viet Minh armed forces was likely, they would be faced with the decision whether Communist China should intervene openly in force in order to avert this development.

8. The following considerations might induce the Communists to decide in favor of open intervention in force:

a. Decisive defeat of the Viet Minh armed forces would be a grave blow to Communist prestige throughout the world and would seriously diminish prospects for the expansion of Communism in Asia.

b. A US military commitment in Indochina might form part of a larger plan, possibly involving, in the minds of the Communists, the resurgence of Chinese Nationalist strength, aimed at the destruction of the Chinese Communist regime. In any case, decisive defeat of the Viet Minh armed forces would bring US power to the borders of China.

c. Whatever the initial intention, successful US military action in Indochina might encourage the US to increase pressure on other points of the Communist periphery.

d. Many observers, particularly in the Asian neutralist states, would consider the US in the wrong in Indochina and would condone Chinese Communist intervention as a move to "liberate Indochina from American imperialism." These sentiments could be effectively exploited by Communist propaganda.

e. The US, despite its warnings, might not retaliate strongly against Communist China, because it would fear that such retaliation would alienate its NATO allies, result in wider military deployment of US forces, cause Peiping to invoke the Sino-Soviet treaty, and thereby increase the danger of general war.

f. By intervening openly in force the Chinese Communists might be able to prevent indefinitely both the successful accomplishment of the US mission and the disengagement of substantial US forces from Indochina.

9. On the other hand, the following considerations might deter the Communists from deciding to intervene openly in force:

a. It would be more important to concentrate upon domestic problems including strengthening of Communist China's economy.

b. There would be a grave risk of US reprisals against Communist China and possibly of general war.

c. Indochina is remote from the USSR and the centers of power in Communist China. Accordingly, the establishment of a strong US position in Indochina would not constitute, to the same degree as in Korea, a threat to Chinese Communist and Soviet power in the Far East.

d. Short of actual intervention, the Chinese Communists could acquire a position of strength by reinforcing and rehabilitating the military facilities on Hainan. This position would dominate the Gulf of Tonkin, and pose a distinct threat to sea-air lines of communications of US forces in Indochina and to rear bases.

e. The loss in prestige involved in the defeat of the Viet Minh armed forces could in part be offset by depicting the Viet Minh as an indigenous liberation movement. Moreover, the Viet Minh Government and its armed forces could be preserved on Chinese soil where they could exercise constant military and political pressure on the forces of the US and the Associated States.

f. The military and political nature of the Indochina war is such that even if the US defeated the Viet Minh field forces, guerrilla action could probably be continued indefinitely and preclude the establishment of complete non-Communist control over that area.

g. Under such circumstances, the US might have to maintain a military commitment in Indochina for years to come. Heavy US commitments in Indochina over the long run might cause concern to US allies and might create divergences between the US and neutralist states.

10. The Director of Central Intelligence and the Deputy Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff, believe that the Communist reaction to commitment of US forces in Indochina would largely depend upon US posture prior to, and at the same time of, such commitment. If the US posture made manifest to the Communists that US naval and air retaliatory power would be fully applied to Communist China, then Peking and Moscow would seek to avoid courses of action which would bring about such retaliation. In such circumstances, the chances are better than even that the Chinese Communists would not openly intervene in Indochina, even if they believed that failure to intervene would mean the defeat at that time of the Viet Minh field forces in Indochina. Therefore the Director of Central Intelligence and the Deputy Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff, believe that in weighing the arguments set forth in paragraphs 8 and 9 Chinese Communist leaders, in such circumstances, would estimate that it was more advantageous to them to support a guerrilla action in Indochina and tie down large US forces in such a war, than to risk US retaliatory action against China itself which open intervention would involve. However, the Communists would almost certainly continue to support the rem-

nants of the Viet Minh, including re-equipping these remnant forces on the Chinese side of the border and possibly augmenting them with Chinese "volunteers" so that Viet Minh resistance could be continued indefinitely. Moreover, they would pursue their objectives in the rest of Southeast Asia by all means short of open military intervention.

11. The Special Assistant, Intelligence, Department of State, the Director of Naval Intelligence, the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, Intelligence, Department of the Army, and the Director of Intelligence, USAF, believe that the condition of "decisive defeat of the field forces of the Viet Minh" prescribed for considering this problem would necessarily result in such a serious setback to Communist prestige, security, and expansionism as to lead to the following conclusions. In weighing the arguments presented in paragraphs 8 and 9, the Communist leaders in both Peking and Moscow would probably give greatest consideration to: (a) the loss of prestige, the threat to Bloc security, and the setback to Communist expansionism in Southeast Asia involved in a decisive defeat of the Viet Minh armed forces and, (b) the risk of direct US action against Communist China. To the Communists, the consequences of the decisive defeat of the Viet Minh armed forces would be both certain and far reaching. In appraising the possible nature and scale of direct US action against the China mainland, the Communists would weigh any US warnings of probable consequences of intervention, the temper of US and free world opinion, and the probable US desire not to expand a local action. It is unlikely that the Communists' appraisal would lead them to the conviction that the US reaction to their intervention in Indochina would take the form of extensive and intense warfare against Communist China. In any case, their overriding suspicion of the ultimate motive of US forces in strength on or near the borders of Communist China would strongly influence their courses of action. Thus, the thought foremost in their minds would most probably be that failure to dislodge US military forces from the Chinese border would lead to increasing challenges to Communist power elsewhere. We

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therefore believe that the chances are probably better than even that the Communists would accept the risk involved and that the } Chinese Communists would intervene openly and in force in an effort to save the Communist position in Indochina.

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